

Select a Taste of Michigan

Farmer Profile for Rod Winkel

History of farming operation (include acreage, food grown, etc): Rod Winkel is a 3rd generation fruit and vegetable farmer. His family: grandfather, parents, he and his wife, have farmed in Southwest Michigan for nearly 80 years. They currently raise approximately 1000 acres of asparagus, tart cherries, peaches, grapes, apples, and summer squash (zucchini). Rod has a BS from Michigan State University. Rod's wife Jeanette does all the bookwork and assists with farm management in numerous other ways.

Q: What do you like about farming?

A: I like the fact that farming is a new challenge every day. With farming no two days are alike. One never knows quite what problems will present themselves, during any given day, that must be overcome by use of a good dose of ingenuity. I also appreciate the fact that I have much autonomy and independence in making my own choices and seeing the "fruit of my labor".

Q: How do you approach farming?

A: I view farming as a challenge and challenges "light my fire". Sometimes the challenge comes in the form of how best to manage the help on the farm. Sometimes it is making an important production decision such as how what to plant and how much. Other times it is dealing with problems such as weather disasters that just have to be endured. Those situations may result in great financial loss. However, when that happens, rather than becoming discouraged, one focuses on doing everything possible to improve on the chances of having higher quality and production next year, which will hopefully more than compensate for that loss.

Q: How important is the consumer in your planning and production cycle?

A: The consumer is "number one". If I do not grow a product that satisfies the needs of the consumer I will soon be out of business. Obviously, I can not eat it all himself. Being attune to, and satisfying the needs of the consumer presents the ultimate challenge and serves to guide every production practice that occurs on the farm.

Q: How do you include sustainable practices?

A: I use IPM (Integrated Pest Management), a relatively new system that utilizes all possible practices to minimize inputs and maintain long-run sustainability. For example, my fields are monitored by scouts who systematically and timely check for potential pest problems so they can be corrected when they reach carefully researched threshold levels. In addition, Michigan State University is conducting research on my farm, to find means to significantly reduce the use of pesticides. I also rotate where I plant a crop each year. This helps to reduce the build-up of pests and thereby reduces the need for pesticides and other control measures. I use grass sod in my orchards to help prevent compaction and erosion, and use cover crops to build organic matter and suppress nematode pests in the soil. These measures help ensure that the consumer is not only sold a high quality but also as safe a product as possible. It is my goal to use these sustainable practices to put out a quality product that is going to be safe and acceptable on the market place.

Q: Why do you work this way?

A: It is my desire to leave the ground in good shape for future generations. Land is not an unlimited resource and there are areas that are much more suitable for fruit and vegetable production based on existing infrastructure and climate and soils. One must therefore do all possible to protect and preserve the productive potential of that land. If I am attentive to care for the soil then I can be assured that at retirement I can reap the benefits of that care because my land will have optimal value when it is passed on to the next generation.

Q: What's the basic philosophy that supports the way you work?

A: The consumer is presented with a multitude of choices. Subsequently markets are highly competitive. The consumer demands the highest quality. It is my goal to produce the highest quality product possible and therefore ensure access to the market. In addition, one has to look at the fact that a producer is supplying someone's wants. Wants change over time and it is a challenge to stay tuned to those changing demands.

Q: Why is a program like Select a Taste of Michigan important?

A: The Select a Taste of Michigan presents Michigan agriculture to the consumer in a very positive light. Consumers most often hear about problems in agriculture. Seldom is that balanced by helping consumers gain a more in depth understanding of agriculture and the effort that the farmers take to ensure the safety and highest quality of their product.

Q: What issues do you look to in the future?

A: I see a number of issues that are becoming increasingly important. Pest control is likely to become an increasingly important challenge in the future. More and more insects and other pests are becoming resistant to pesticides. Another important issue is the fact that fruit and vegetable production in the US is heavily dependent on hand labor. We can not compete with the cost of labor and less extensive regulatory environment in other countries. As we watch more and more producers lose "ground" to imports we become more at risk as a society as the percent that we produce continues to shrink. We have to ask ourselves how important it is to support our local producers and the much fresher produce they supply? Should we become so dependent on other nations and put ourselves at such great risk? It is one thing to be dependant on other nations for oil but quite another to be dependent on them for the food that is even more essential and feeding one's family.

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